

Emigration to Liberia

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AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE THE American Colonization Society, January 21, 1879.

BY Genl. S. C. ARMSTRONG, Principal of Hampton Institute, Virginia.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

WASHINGTON, CITY: Colonization Building, 450 Pennsylvania Avenue.

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ADDRESS.

What is the sentiment of the colored people of this country, the South especially, in respect to making the United States their home, and in respect to emigration to Liberia?

A few evenings ago, I asked of the over two hundred young colored men and women who have come from throughout the land, principally from the South, to the Hampton school for an education, what they thought of going to Liberia. A dozen hands went quickly up. I inquired of each one the ground of his idea. A variety of reasons was given that, I believe, fairly illustrates the status of the negro mind on the Liberia question.

One young man had, in the spirit of Christian discipleship, consecrated himself to the work of preaching the gospel in that land; several felt that in this country the negro never will be, as they expressed it, "free;" that the black man is and will be far from being free to all that is open to the white man, and that only in a land of their own can they be on even terms with all, and find the freedom which they seek.

The students had heard of coffee culture in Liberia and of other inducements to go; but, on the other hand, some were awaiting letters from friends who had gone over promising to write how they got on, but had never been heard from; some had heard of great havoc among emigrants, and there was a general sense of insecurity and uncertainty as to that country.

One fair-skinned, bright girl had an uncle who had organized sixteen churches in Liberia and was full of hope and enthusiasm. She meant to go as a missionary; other young women had the same idea; the great 4 majority had no thought of emigration, and many had decided notions against the Republic.

As a whole, the students of Hampton expect to remain in this country, their idea being expressed by one who said "The colored man is better off here than anywhere else in the world."

Our students have, more than once, been addressed by prominent Southern men who have said to them, in effect: "Many of you are Virginians; we must work together to build up this Commonwealth. We believe in this work of education; you shall have your share of the school money and we will protect you in your rights."

This is the tone of progressive men at the South, and their strength is indicated by the fact that, at least in Virginia, no Democratic candidate dares venture, in his canvas for election to office, to denounce the public school system.

The intelligent colored men and women who are honestly working for the real welfare of their people in the Southern States, are, so far as I know about them, winning the respect, good-will and moral support of the people of all classes, and in spite of many discouragements, are generally cheerful and contented. Even the average freedman does not care to change his home. Yet, in some quarters, there are grievous complaints of hard times, poor pay and bad treatment, which create a desire for a place where living may be easier.

It would be strange if among the four millions of Anglo-Africans there were not men of honest purpose, and good capacity, anxious to try a country of their own. The missionary idea is gaining strength every year. The little company of graduates from negro schools in America, one of them

from Hampton, who are doing excellent work at the Mendi Mission, under the American Missionary Association, near to Liberia, is proof that the peculiar field of the enlightened freedmen of this country is not forgotten.

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Boston is looking to the South for men to enter the grand field opened up by Stanley whenever the means shall be in hand; and I do not think it will seek in vain.

Twelve years ago an earnest but unsuccessful effort was made by that Board to secure colored missionaries for Africa; yet there were many scores of educated negroes in the Northern States.

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We are likely, I believe, to find in the South the finest products of Anglo-African civilization, a better, simpler, more straight-forward development. Thence, not exclusively of course, will go across the sea the men who will best illustrate to the world the capabilities of their race. White men will get a large part of the money that is to be made from African trade, but I have faith that colored men will do their full share in the work of regeneration waiting to be done there, the need of which is the most piteous "Macedonian Cry" that ever was sent over to Christendom.

Africa—Liberia as one of its open doors—is the field for an Anglo-African crusade. No other region is for a moment to be thought of compared with this. Just as, in the Providence of God, his people are set free, and the young and earnest and able among them are rising to a plane of Christian manhood and womanhood, the wonders and resources of the Dark Continent are unfolded. Who doubts the final triumph of right over wrong in the carrying back there of the very Christ to build up whose Kingdom the slave-hunters were unconscious agents.

But there must be men and women of pure devotion and lives, of clear, wise heads, and endowed with common sense. The requisition for common sense will be the hardest to fill.

Among our colored people there is a discontented class; on edge with things here; much occupied with its grievances, and, those of this class who are plucky and adventurous, are disposed to try the Colored Republic.

As things are here, the finer the cultivation of a colored man, the keener his sufferings—especially in the North, where his mental and moral wants are so lavishly supplied, but his social cravings neglected, and his tinted skin is a *taboo* from congenial association. I think I am right in stating that their advanced culture in America tends to skepticism. The old religious nature is, to an educated

negro, withered by the pain that comes from finding that that which God made, his complexion, is as a sign set against him a—mark of degradation.

Yet among the colored people themselves there is a prejudice of color, here unobserved, because overpowered by that of the whites which lumps together under its ban the purest black and the clearest white (provided a few drops of negro blood can be traced to the latter,) and by making common cause between them forces them into one social body. Remove this pressure from the outside and those of pure and mixed blood become mutually jealous; the latter assuming a superiority by reason of the white or “Norman” blood in their veins, and the pure being proud of their purity. This is illustrated in Jamaica where the whites, colored and blacks are completely severed socially. A trustee of Liberia College told me that this question had given some trouble in the appointments at that institution, and it appears in Liberian politics. Going over there is not entire escape from prejudice of color.

There was evinced, in my conversation with the students at Hampton, much curiosity about Liberia. They represent a class of negroes who take a very matter-of-fact view of that country; they wish to “better themselves,” and in their pinching poverty, and in the money famine of the South, turn eagerly to brighter prospects.

Wise, just treatment of the colored laborer in the South is far from universal. I never saw or heard of a successful Southern farmer who did not believe in negro labor as “the best in the world;” yet one of the leading agricultural journals says, “We are cursed with negro labor.”

The “darkey” is a convenient scapegoat for those who want to blame somebody if ends don't meet. Good, kind management and wise directing heads are indispensable to success with colored workmen, and that they don't always get; the latter depend very much for the value of their labor upon favorable outward conditions, the frequent absence of which is to be expected in their circumstances.

Liberia, as giving to the enterprising but discontented or ill-treated negro laborer scope and challenge for all his powers, is a most important factor in reconstruction. It is simple justice, very inadequate, but so far as it goes is a recognition of his claim to try the land he was torn from.

Thirty years ago, statesmen like Clay and Webster talked of the nation's debt to the negro, and this inspired the Colonization scheme, which commanded a strong support from the South. After slapping the abolitionists in the face with their talk of right and wrong, a later generation freed the slave, as a war measure enfranchised him, used his vote as political capital, and, after squandering it, have left the burden of his education and improvement to the old slave-holders. The account

has not yet been squared. It is as true to-day as it was thirty 7 years ago that there is debt to the race brought here by violence and wrong, and a part of that debt is a fair chance in the land of their fathers.

A difficulty in the Liberian question is the negroes' self-distrust. The race has sadly, perhaps inevitably, adopted the white man's idea of itself. It has, as a whole, no enthusiasm, no idea or sentiment.

It lacks organizing power, guiding instincts. It has no genius for throwing and keeping uppermost its best and ablest men; it has plenty of feeling, but no flow of it, no tendency to any clear and general end or purpose. Such tendency is developed slowly, by long experience, by endless struggle with difficulty ending in victory, and that the citizens of Liberia have just commenced. The ex-slave is not easily allured to a country ruled by his own people. I have an impression that the Liberians are lacking, like the race here, in *esprit de corps*, in patriotic sentiment and in strong administration.

There should be accorded to the freedmen the widest opportunity to make for themselves homes on African shores if they choose to try it. I rejoice in the existence of the Colonization Society, believing in its work, the founding of an African Republic. I believe in it as a beginning not as an end; a hopeful beginning; a good showing for thirty years of effort. It is not a power; but is it not a germ of power? Generations alone can answer this. To disparage it by contrast is to reproach the negro for being unfortunate. It were better to blame the Almighty directly for His doings in permitting suffering, injustice and misfortune to exist.

Give the negro a chance. You don't despise the tottering steps of a little child: time and hard knocks only can bring strength. Let the black man's slender self-respect stiffen by struggle, and his race pride gain by race effort. In the United States it is a curse to be black; the highly educated negro is like a man without a country. Help him to make one for himself.

The African race has been pushed suddenly from the depths of bondage to the highest liberty; it has skipped centuries in the line of development. On its unaccustomed height it is confused; it is in its own way; easily victimized by bad men, and troubles are inevitable.

Genuine progress is slow, and is the result not so much of struggle, as of successful struggle. The thing must not only be attempted, but it must be done, and there should be a century in which to do it.

When a Northern man recently asked me "Have the colored people improved in morals in the past ten years," I asked him, "Has New England improved in morals in the past ten years?" Every stage of civilization has its peculiar difficulties and nations forge slowly ahead.

Progress is a moral rather than a material thing. All that is good in civilization is "The sum of the sacrifices of those who have gone before us."

The African question, at bottom, is whether there will be enough men and women of that race who shall unselfishly and wisely devote themselves to its welfare. Whatever shall be fine in their future will rest on this foundation of sacrifice.

Has Liberia the men, or can she get them from here? With them her future is assured, and she will move Africa.

Ten such men would save her.

The Colonization Society claims much for its success so far. Considering that it has planted exotic ideas where men have for ages been fixed in the lowest conditions, the Republic may be considered a wonder. Compare it with the early stages of our own country's growth and there is nothing to discourage.

We know too little about her. The roll of pamphlets sent me to read contains no exhaustive statement of facts, but general expressions of praise. I never felt really informed about Liberia till I read the letters of Mr. Williams, correspondent of the *Charleston News and Courier*, whose mingled criticism and commendation made the Republic appear like any new terrestrial region, full of advantages and of disadvantages. For the first time I found what an intelligent man would say against it. There is need of a fair, forcible account of that country, with maps and pictures, that shall be to the colored man what a chart is to a sailor—d guide to success and a guard against disaster.

How about colored communities in the United States?

A colony composed of the 450 manumitted slaves of John Randolph was, in 1846, placed in Miami County, Ohio. "They suffered much at " first from prejudice, yet soon found kind friends. While producing " nothing remarkable, the old have died off and the new generation has " made considerable advancement. They, however, owe more to external " influences than to inherent qualities." This statement I gleaned from an apparently reliable letter to the *New York Tribune*.

There are negro communities of which I have no definite knowledge, notably one or two in Canada; but all, I believe, were established by an influence from without. Certainly, in America, the negroes show no tendency in themselves to segregate.

They drift to the cities in throngs, where their mortality increases and their self-respect, as a class, seems to diminish.

In a simple, industrious, country life, the freedmen gain in numbers and in average prosperity and worth.

Against this background of life in America, stands Liberia, attempt-achievements whose success its record here makes doubtful.

Let us wait and see the negro on his own ground, on his own resources, blundering away, but slowly learning from his blunders—as we all do—getting experience and digesting it. Let the negro race maintain a respectable republic, and it will furnish the best possible answer to the charge so often made, “The negro has done nothing.”